

Everybody talks about the need to reduce our reliance on foreign oil from countries that hate us or are unstable. We should do this primarily for reasons of national security. It is just unwise to leave so much of our economy at the mercy of a few uncertain foreign lands. If we wean ourselves off of... Everybody talks about the need to reduce our reliance on foreign oil from countries that hate us or are unstable. We should do this primarily for reasons of national security. It is just unwise to leave so much of our economy at the mercy of a few uncertain foreign lands. If we wean ourselves off of this foreign oil we may achieve ancillary environmental and economic benefits as well.

Great. We all agree. Let's do it. Yeah, can you hear the silence?

So, if we all agree that we need to do this, what's the problem? Where are all the bills that are moving through Congress to achieve this? The problem is easy to define. The solution, however, is very complex and difficult. This is not an issue of partisanship getting in the way, either. Members of Congress first like to address those issues that are immediate and simple, and they postpone the tough stuff as long as possible. I guess people in Congress are no different from people anywhere.

So, here's an idea. It's one that I will be working on diligently in Congress this year. It deals mainly with energy within the transportation sector and has bipartisan support. We call it fuel choice.

When you want to power your car today, you really only have one choice of a fuel source: oil. Whether it's diesel or gasoline, it's made from oil. There are no real alternatives.

There are other options using existing technology, but you do not get many choices. There's ethanol, which can be made from many things. There's methanol that can be made from coal. The United States is the Saudi Arabia of coal with 25% of all the world's coal reserves. There's biodiesel, which is diesel fuel made from vegetable oils. And there are the plug-in hybrid vehicles that allow the car to run entirely on electricity at low speeds.

The proposal here is to require auto manufacturers, over time, to build cars that give the owner a choice of at least one other fuel source that is not oil-based and require fuel stations to supply it. As long as the vehicle meets emission standards, it doesn't matter which alternative fuel it uses. There are a few fundamental concepts at work here. First, start to produce vehicles to run on something that does not use oil. Second, we cannot count on some technological breakthrough that may or may not occur. All of the above mentioned propulsion systems are technologically and economically available today. Third, rather than picking a winning fuel or technology, we should let the various choices fight it out in the marketplace. Fourth, still allow people to have cars with the size and performance that they want. Cars using these alternative fuels can wean us off of foreign oil with no loss of horsepower or size in vehicles. On top of all this, the cost to make today's cars run on both oil and one of these other fuels (except for the hybrid) is only a couple of hundred dollars per car. So, there is not an issue of affordability either.

Now, this proposal does not attempt to deal with the entire energy issue. As a result, it does not deal with oil exploration in Alaska or nuclear power, just to name a few. I happen to think that both of those things (and some others, too) are part of our overall energy solution, but a bill that big would be unlikely to pass and would have to contain so much compromise as to be ineffective.

So, this is a start. It's long past time to start.